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ABSTRACT

Civics is a subject usually taught only in grades 4, 8, and 12. This article supports the teaching of civics in every grade, every day. The article offers a list of topics for an elementary school civics and government curriculum and suggests an informal elementary school civics curriculum consisting of activities during the school day that reinforce, by practice or example, lessons taught in the formal curriculum. Elementary schools can informally model the formal civics curriculum via classroom rules, codes of conduct, classroom interaction, student councils, keeping well-informed, searching for information, and presentations. The article features a K-4 content standards for civics and government diagram. (BT)

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Civic Education in Elementary School

Louis Rosen

In nearly every state, teachers and principals are being exposed to new standards for the teaching of civics and government *(see sidebar)*. But a crowded elementary school curriculum places a great burden on teachers to cover all the material they are supposed to teach in a given time span. As a result, civics is a subject usually taught only in grades 4, 8, and 12, in conjunction with American government. And while National Education Goal 3—"By the year 2000, all students will leave grades 4, 8, and 12 having demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter including...civics and government..."—is admirable, most states and school districts have taken that to mean that if they *offer* civics and government in those grades, they have fulfilled their responsibility. But to be meaningful, civics should be taught in *every grade, every day* by teachers who understand the importance of civic education in the lives of their students.

A recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Report Card revealed that students have only a superficial knowledge of civics. For example, only 38 percent of eighth graders knew that Congress makes laws. Other studies indicate that student interest in politics and government are at an all-time low.

The Formal Curriculum

This could change under the standards movement as states and school districts begin to place added emphasis on civic education. For example, the following is a composite list of topics for an elementary school civics and government curriculum, taken from standards in ten states:

- Defining power and authority;
- Necessity and purposes of government;
- Need for rules and laws;
- Abiding by majority rule;
- Key people in positions of authority;
- Key ideas of the Declaration of Independence;
- Key ideas of the Constitution and Bill of Rights;
- Key ideas of democracy;
- Differences between limited and unlimited government;
- How nations interact;
- What citizenship means;
- Three branches of government;
- Responsibilities of state and local governments;
- Basic freedoms of Americans;
- Relationship of the United States to other nations; and
- The roles of the citizen in American democracy.

The Informal Curriculum

The informal elementary school civics curriculum consists of activities during the school day that reinforce, by practice or example, lessons taught in the formal curriculum, such as the importance of voting, majority rule, minority rights, respect for property, respect and tolerance for the ideas of others, compromise, caring about the well-being of others, fairness, and determining responsibility when a wrong or an injury occurs. When practiced often enough, these lessons in good citizenship become good habits.

Some of the ways in which elementary schools can informally

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model and augment the formal civics curriculum include:

Classroom rules. Next to the home, the classroom is the best place to teach students about fairness and rules. For example, the Center for Civic Education has a lesson in its Authority curriculum in which students are asked to examine a chaotic classroom scene, discuss what is wrong with it, and suggest how it could it be fixed. Such lessons point out to students the need for rules and someone in authority to enforce those rules. The Authority curriculum also helps students determine what makes a good rule, how existing rules can be improved, and how to select persons for positions of authority.

Once elementary school students understand the importance of good classroom rules, they are ready to discuss with their teacher what kinds of rules are necessary in their classroom and how they should be enforced. To assist them, the teacher might suggest that the class make rules in such areas as talking, eating and drinking, safety, property, and class operation.

Examples of such rules might include:

- No talking when others are talking;
- Raising your hand when you want to talk;
- No eating or drinking in class;
- No running in the classroom;
- Keeping your hands to yourself;
- No taking or touching the property of others without permission; and
- Being on time.

Codes of conduct. Most schools have codes of conduct that are given at the beginning of each year to all students and their families. Although such codes often have many do's and don'ts, a simple list of activities that are not permitted on school grounds is usually sufficient for elementary schools. The list should be written in language that all students can understand, and students may be given responsibility for writing and annually revising the code.

Classroom interaction. It is increasingly important in a democratic classroom to focus on skills that are required for informed, effective, and responsible participation in the political process and civil society. These skills include those needed to interact and work cooperatively with others. To interact is to question, to answer, and to deliberate with civility. It is also a way to build coalitions and to manage conflict in a fair and peaceful manner.

A "habit of good citizenship" requires that students learn to listen to the ideas of others, to determine the degree to which they agree or disagree with those ideas, and to take a position on the issue in question. To develop this habit, it is important for educators to challenge students with a series of issues that they feel strongly about, stimulate their thinking, and force them to take a position. Although civic knowledge is obviously important, good civic educators are not so much concerned about teaching *what* to think than *how* to think.

Student councils. Many elementary schools have student councils, which can review school rules for appropriateness and meaningful language. Student councils are also an ideal place for students to learn about representative democracy. But student councils must be given a certain amount of responsibility or members will quickly become bored and inattentive. Some important tasks for student councils to undertake, in addition to helping review school rules, could include conducting school assemblies, inspecting the campus for cleanliness, helping with safety procedures, and making presentations about school needs.

Keeping well-informed. One of the most important "habits of good citizenship" is being well-informed. There are a number of ways to do this. Many metropolitan newspapers have student editions and some of these are distributed to schools free of charge. There also are weekly newsmagazines that cover a variety of current events. Reading the local newspaper and school bulletin is an important way to stay informed about community and school issues.

Having students write a class or school newsletter, or produce a weekly radio or television current affairs program, is a good way to teach students the importance be being well-informed.

Searching for information. The American Library Association defines information literacy as "being able to recognize when information is needed and having the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information." Since information may be presented in a number of formats, the requirements for information literacy are changing rapidly. Thanks to technology, never before have there been so many ways to search for information.

Information literacy includes being able look things up in a library, being able to use the various parts of a newspaper or magazine, being able to use a telephone directory, being able to find information by using the telephone, and being able to find information via

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PROFESSIONAL ADVISORY

This article is in support of the following standard from *Standards for Quality Elementary Schools, Third Edition* (NAESP 1996):

Curriculum and Instruction. There is a common core of learning that provides children with knowledge, skills, and understandings to function effectively in a global society.

- Children develop a keen sense of personal and civic responsibility.

e-mail. With more and more children able to use computers at a young age, their skills in using the Internet and CD-ROMs promises to greatly increase the number of information-literate students in elementary school.

Presentations. Influencing the way in which persons in positions of authority, whether they be principals, superintendents, school board members, or legislators, think or make decisions is an important skill for all citizens in a democracy. Students must learn to

K-4 Content Standards for Civics and Government

I. What Is Government and What Should It Do?

A. What is government?

B. Where do people in government get the authority to make, apply, and enforce rules and laws, and manage disputes about them?

C. Why is government necessary?

D. What are some of the most important things governments do?

E. What are the purposes of rules and laws?

F. How can you evaluate rules and laws?

G. What are the differences between limited and unlimited governments?

H. Why is it important to limit the power of government?

II. What Are the Basic Values and Principles of American Democracy?

A. What are the most important values and principles of American democracy?

B. What are some important beliefs Americans have about themselves and their government?

C. Why is it important for Americans to share certain values, principles, and beliefs?

D. What are the benefits of diversity in the United States?

E. How should conflicts about diversity be prevented or managed?

F. How can people work together to promote the values and principles of American democracy?

III. How Does the Government Established by the Constitution Embody the Purposes, Values, and Principles of American Democracy?

A. What is the United States Constitution and why is it important?

B. What does the national government do and how does it protect individual rights and promote the common good?

C. What are the major responsibilities of state governments?

D. What are the major responsibilities of local governments?

E. Who represents you in the legislative and executive branches of your local, state, and national governments?

IV. What Is the Relationship of the United States to Other Nations and to World Affairs?

A. How is the world divided into nations?

B. How do nations interact with one another?

V. What Are the Roles of the Citizen in American Democracy?

A. What does it mean to be a citizen of the United States?

B. How does a person become a citizen?

C. What are important rights in the United States?

D. What are important responsibilities of Americans?

E. What dispositions or traits of character are important to the preservation and improvement of American democracy?

F. How can Americans participate in their government?

G. What is the importance of political leadership and public service?

H. How should Americans select leaders?

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express their opinions by letter, phone, e-mail, or personal appearance, using logic and facts. To hone this critical skill, students need to practice in well-planned and structured opportunities under the guidance of knowledgeable mentors.

Margaret Branson, chair of the Center for Civic Education's Task Force on Civic Education, says that civic education in a democracy is actually education in self-government, and that civic knowledge is what students need to know in order to make good self-government decisions. Civic education must be considered central not only to American education but to the well-being of our democratic society. A strong case can be made that the mission of the Center for Civic Education—"to promote enlightened, competent, and responsible citizens"—should be the mission of every elementary school in the nation.

For More Information

The Center for Civic Education is currently engaged in a national campaign to encourage state and local agencies to establish adequate requirements for education in civics and government. For additional information and samples of Center materials, visit the Center for Civic Education's Web site at **www.civiced.org** or contact Louis Rosen at the Center for Civic Education, 5146 Douglas Fir Road, Calabasas, CA 91302. Phone: 800-350-4223; Fax: 818-591- 9330; e-mail: center4civ@aol.com

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